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A Night at the Opera

Donna Pucciani

It is ten p.m. The diva must die in the next twenty minutes,
preferably of consumption. Programs cease to rustle,
and from the stalls, mother-of-pearl opera glasses
zoom in on the soprano's forlorn cleavage, her pale lips
celebrating her own demise.

She has collapsed on the floor, and having been lifted gently
by the baritones while the tenor weeps into his mustache,
makes ready to cough and sing simultaneously until the end.

Sweating in the pit, the conductor cues the violins for the final
trill of a tawdry phrase rendered exquisite by her bell-like tessitura.
The baton virtually waves itself, the score closed, the maestro's eyes
on the threadbare woman who plays to the balcony with smoky mouth,
lifting herself off the pillowed chaise on one elbow,
gasping largos to box-seat sniffles in the dark.

There are no villains here, an arena for perfume, bow ties, Kleenex.
No magic flutes, bargains with the devil, hunchbacks, swordfights,
or mythical creatures battling each other in the pompous roar
of Germanic waves. This lore embraces starving artists in a garrett,
a lost key, a romance played out in mawkish cafes and snowy streets,
poverty backlit by the woodwinds, lovers lavished by strings.
Italian vowels like feathers grace the libretto that turns its last page
at precisely ten nineteen, when Rudolfo's final cry makes the audience
forget recalcitrant children, a dented fender,
disagreeable in-laws, next week's surgery, unpaid bills.

Minutes later, Mimi resurrects herself, curtseying deeply
outside the velvet curtain. Rudolfo bows, his rags waving
among thrown roses in a last gesture, holding her tiny hand no longer frozen.

When champagne corks arc in a gilded ballroom,
death while singing gives way to bubbles in fluted crystal,
a bright denial of domestic incongruities that follow musicians
and listeners home in traffic jams and snow. It is no longer necessary
to burn furniture for warmth or flirt with the local vixen,
but the small home fires still smolder, cinders on a hearth still warm
as the car pulls into the garage.